

ARIESSY OF  
MIDGARD SAMPLE  
LB ARTHUR



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## CHAPTER 1

Seventeen-year-old Ariessy Taylor sat at the table feeling so tired, the nerves in her eyes throbbed. Still, her alarm woke her on time that morning, which made a pleasant change. She rested her chin on her hand and watched the wild birds through the kitchen window from her mid-terrace home in Margam, UK. A seagull swooped down to eat the dried fruit she'd left out for them the night before; *how much do you understand about life—do you ever feel alone?* She thought.

Her mother, Mari, paused mid-way through buttering the crumpets as her eyes drifted to the front page of the morning paper. Her mouth dropped open when she read the headline. 'Holy hell, do you think this was Freyja's curse?' she said.

Ariessy was only half-listening; she was focused on a bird washing her feathers in the pond outside.

‘Essy?’ said Mari, ‘what do you think?’

‘It’s on the counter, isn’t it?’ she replied.

Mari was scanning the rest of the article. ‘What’s on the counter?’

‘Your purse,’ she replied.

‘My purse? What are you talking about, darling?’ Mari gazed up at her and frowned in that concerned way she always did when Ariessy lapsed into her daydreams.

‘Earth calling Essy, are you reading me?’ Eccentric was the word most people used for Mari; others said she was mad as a box of frogs, but those people didn’t really know her. She was an intelligent woman with natural beauty who didn’t suffer fools. She tapped the bottom of the butter knife on the wood countertop. ‘Essy, are you still with us, darling, or should I be looking for somewhere to plug you in?’

Ariessy broke from her daze and checked the time on the wall clock. ‘Oh no, I’m going to be late; I haven’t even dried my hair yet.’ She raked her fingers through her long chestnut strands and squinted. It had a natural curl to it like her mother’s. ‘I knew I should have used more conditioner.’

‘It’s only eight o’clock; you’ve got plenty of time; finish your breakfast first.’ Mari placed a plate of hot crumpets in front of her.

‘You know I don’t have much of an appetite in the mornings,’ she stretched out her arms. ‘My body feels stiff as a board.’

‘You missed dinner last night. You’ll waste away if you don’t eat properly. I already have your father to worry about; I don’t need you giving me grey hairs as well.’

‘I keep telling you not to worry about me.’

‘I came up to your bedroom last night to call you down for dinner and you weren’t moving; I had to check you were still breathing—for a terrifying moment, I wondered if you were dead.’ The stunned, wide-eyed expression Mari gave her made Ariessy laugh. ‘It’s not funny; you scared me half to death. Why are you so tired all the time lately? Are you sick?’ Mari pushed her hand against Ariessy’s forehead.

‘No, I’m fine; stop worrying,’ she replied.

‘Are you sure you’re not depressed? I know you’re worried about your father, but darlin—’

‘I’m not depressed. I’m not sleeping well, that’s all. I’m okay.’

‘You need to take more care of yourself; you’re not eating enough. If you’re not careful, you’ll get too thin and wiry—you don’t want to end up looking like a pipe cleaner.’

Ariessy giggled and shook her head. ‘Is Nan coming over this morning?’

Mari flicked through the rest of the paper. ‘Yes, she’s going to sit with your dad so that I can go out. I need to buy food; we’re running low on everything.’

‘I keep telling you we should order online.’

‘I like to see for myself what I’m buying; you know that.’

‘I can pick up groceries on my way home if you like; text me a list.’

‘It’s all right, love. I need to get out of the house; I’m getting cabin fever being stuck in all day long.’

‘I’m home all weekend. I’ll sit with Dad if you want to go anywhere.’

‘I don’t want you to worry; I can manage,’ said Mari.

‘Dad’s improved today, though, hasn’t he?’

Mari frowned and avoided Ariessy’s gaze.

‘I thought you said he was feeling better now; you said he just needed more time, and he’d be fine.’

‘Yes, we have to stay positive. We’ll give him another healing session tonight.’

Ariessy couldn’t have wished for a better father than Henry; he spent hours with her when she was a child and was always there for her when she needed him. They shared the same sense of humour and a love of birds. Ariessy was a young girl when Henry demonstrated how to use sorcery to heal their injuries. She hadn’t developed her own healing abilities at that age, but she spent hours learning all the spells ready for when she could put them into practice. She wasn’t a natural healer like her dad; it took determination and lots of concentration, but with persistence and patience, she was competent, which was good enough for her. Henry was the one person in the world who understood her; Ariessy needed his guidance, and since his health declined, she felt abandoned. Mari was kind and loving, but she was more composed and reserved in her affections than Henry and worried about everything, so Ariessy kept her problems to herself because she didn’t want to make things any

worse. Mari's worry was a trait Ariessy hadn't thought she'd inherited until recently; now, all she thought about was her father's illness, and the fear of losing him overwhelmed her. It felt like her guts were being ripped out every time the possibility of losing him entered her mind. She longed to jump in the car and take drives like they had when she was a child or go for a walk along the coast, but his muscles were too weak, and he felt permanently exhausted. The scariest part was that sorcery had become less effective in healing him as time went on, and the past few months, he'd been getting worse.

Isobel knocked on the door, and Mari let her in.

Ariessy had never met either of her biological grandmothers; they both died before she was born. Mari's father, Eric, lived in Canada, and she only met him once when she was a few months old, so she didn't remember him. Isobel had known Henry's mother for many years, so when she died, Isobel became a surrogate mother to Henry and subsequently a nan to Ariessy when she was born. She strode into the kitchen with a tissue pressed against her cheek.

Ariessy reached for her hand and frowned. 'Nan, what's the matter?'

Isobel prided herself on being immaculately dressed. She always wore bright, confident clothes and had perfectly manicured nails. She styled her long white hair the same way every day; tied up in a neat bun with jewelled hair combs pinned on either side, but that morning her hair was sticking out all over

the place; she didn't have a stitch of make-up on, and her clothes were unironed and mismatched.

'What's happened?' asked Ariessy.

Isobel fought back her tears and slumped into a chair at the kitchen table. 'Haven't you heard the news? Everyone's talking about it?' she said.

'No, what news?' Mari put the kettle on.

'Look what they did to her.' Isobel held up the newspaper and pointed to the headline; it read: Pensioner's Foot Found Among her Ashes.

'Oh, yes, I saw it this morning,' said Mari. 'It's awful.'

The photograph was disturbing; a single foot, still wearing a floral pink slipper, resting beneath a wicker chair surrounded by a layer of thick, snowy ash. The walls behind were scorched, but the tall lamp in the corner of the room remained untouched.

Ariessy's green eyes widened. 'Who is it?' she stared at the picture with her hand clamped over her mouth.

'It's Gertie,' said Isobel.

'Gertie Felin? Are you sure?' asked Mari.

'How could it be?' Ariessy peered at the picture again. 'It's horrible,' she said, turning her head away. 'I can't believe it; what could Gertie have done to activate our goddess's curse?'

Their goddess, Freyja, created the Seivar and gifted them with sorcery under strict conditions—they must only use their abilities to protect Mother Earth and her non-human inhabitants. They must not, under any circumstances, reveal their sorcery to humankind. If humans knew what Seivar

were capable of, they would want to use their gifts to gain personal power, wealth, or rulership over others. The humans would probably try to drag the Seivar community into political frictions throughout the world, undermining Odin's order that humanity remains free to evolve without any supernatural influence. So, the gods made sure it could never happen. If humankind observed Seivar sorcery, they were stripped of the memory and left with only a *déjà vu* of the moments leading up to the event. The Seivar, however, didn't escape so easily. Freyja punished them by spontaneously combusting them to ash.

Some in the Seivar community believed the curse to be an old-wives tale told by mothers to make their children behave because it was such a rare occurrence. There had never been a case in Wales, not that Ariessy knew of anyway—until now. Seeing Gertie's foot in the picture made her stomach turn.

Isobel's frail hand pointed at the picture. 'This wasn't Freyja's curse—that much I know.'

'Then how did it happen?' asked Ariessy.

'Are you sure it's Gertie?' asked Mari.

'Yes, Lucy called me this morning and told me.' Isobel's voice was laden with anger, 'She must have had something to do with it.'

'Oh, Izzy, why would you say something like that?' asked Mari.

'What did she say on the phone?' asked Ariessy.

‘Not much, and she didn’t sound upset, she told me point-blank her mother was dead, as though she were talking about someone else’s mother. Don’t you think that’s odd?’

Ariessy glanced at Mari with a questioning frown.

‘People grieve in different ways; you mustn’t judge her because you don’t think she sounded upset,’ said Mari.

‘Well, whatever Lucy thinks happened, it’s not true. Gertie would never fall foul of our goddess’s curse; it’s impossible.’

‘So, what do you think happened?’ asked Ariessy.

‘Obviously, someone killed her,’ said Isobel.

‘What? Why would anyone want to kill Gertie?’

‘Essy, please don’t encourage her,’ said Mari.

‘I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. Gertie had her faults, I know, she wasn’t the easiest woman to get along with, but incompetence was not one of them,’ said Isobel.

Mari folded her arms across her chest. ‘Would you listen to yourself? Are you aware of the accusations you’re making?’

‘I wanted her to come and live with me, she was lonely in that house all by herself, but Lucy insisted she stay at home, now we know why don’t we? That girl always works too many hours at the Authority; she was never around to help Gertie.’

‘She probably felt it was her duty to take care of her mother,’ said Mari.

Isobel spat out her words as though they left a bad taste in her mouth. ‘And look how that turned out.’

Ariessy placed a china cup on the table in front of Isobel.

‘Here, drink this; it’s lemon tea.’

‘You’re a good girl, Essy.’ Isobel stroked the side of her face.  
‘Do you want some breakfast?’ asked Mari.  
‘No, thank you, I feel too sick to eat. How is Henry this morning?’

‘Not great,’ said Mari. ‘He’s sleeping again now.’  
‘I’m sure it will pass; he’s been up and down for a few weeks now.’

‘Do you think it will? I’m so worried,’ said Ariessy.  
‘I’ll give him some healing when he wakes up, love.’  
Sorcery was a remarkable gift to be given—but using the energies had side effects. Appliances turned themselves on, and alarms could be set off up to a mile down the road. If too many Seivar used their energies at the same time, the neighbourhood sounded like alarm-city for a few minutes afterwards. Modern technology was putting the Seivar community at greater risk as time went on, and as a result, they had to be meticulous in their calculations whenever they used their gifts.

Isobel clutched her handbag in her lap, took out a small black and white picture of two young girls with tight curls, and gazed at it as tears trembled on her lower lids. ‘We were like sisters growing up, Gertie and me. I remember this day like it was yesterday; it was our first devotional to Freyja. We were only five years old, so we didn’t have our gift yet and were fascinated by the myriad of colours the other Seivar manifested around us during the ritual. We wore our best dresses that day; you can see how happy we were. I’ll never forget, it was September 23rd, 1945. So much happened that year; it was the end of the war. I’ll

always remember, my mother spent hours winding rags in my hair to make those curls,' Isobel clutched a pink, heart-shaped pendant around her neck.

'That's a pretty necklace,' said Ariessy.

'It was a gift from Gertie.'

Mari put her arm around Isobel's shoulder. 'I'm so sorry; I know she meant a lot to you.'

Isobel's eyes hung on the picture of young Gertie. 'I'm going to find out who's responsible for this. They won't get away with it.'

'They? Who are they?' asked Mari.

'Whoever is responsible for killing her,' said Isobel. 'I won't stop until I find out what they're up to.'

A chill rushed through Ariessy's body. She didn't want to think about anyone being up to anything, especially not murder. *Who would want to kill Gertie? She was an old lady?* She thought. Margam wasn't the kind of place you'd expect to hear about the murder of an elderly lady, but it wasn't normal to hear of a Seiva being ashefied by their goddess's curse either. She didn't want to admit it to herself, but deep down, Ariessy knew something was wrong.

'Have you spoken to Lucy about your concerns? I'm sure she'd order an investigation if there's any doubt about the cause of her mother's death,' asked Mari.

'No, it's too dangerous. Lucy could be involved,' said Isobel.

Involved in what? Ariessy glared at her. *Perhaps Nan has lost her mind. After all, she is in her late seventies, despite looking young for it—well, usually anyway, when she wasn't so upset.*

Isobel lifted her handbag onto her lap and dropped the photograph back inside.

'Essy, you'd better get to work,' said Mari.

'Work?' said Isobel.

'At, Acacia,' said Ariessy.

'We didn't want to worry you,' said Mari, 'it was Bronwyn's suggestion.'

'What are you talking about? Didn't want to worry me about what?'

'The headmaster expelled me,' said Ariessy.

'Why, what happened?'

'She called Petra a hag in front of everyone,' said Mari.

'Oh, Essy, really. How many times have I told you, speak well of your friend—of your enemy, say nothing!'

'I know, I was stupid; I just got so angry.'

'You must train that anger.'

'I try, but it's hard. They say there's always one person in every class that knows they're not wanted there; I just wish it didn't always have to be me.'

'Why don't they want you there?' asked Mari.

'Because I'm a freak.'

'What? Why do you say that?'

'There's nothing wrong with being unique,' said Isobel.

'Yes, there is. No one wants to be different, Nan,' she replied.

‘You must learn to be proud of who you are—you can’t run from it.’

‘Ariessy Taylor. You’re no different from any of those other girls. Don’t ever let me hear you talk like that again,’ said Mari.

‘Who is Petra anyway?’ asked Isobel.

‘Eminent Aldrik’s daughter,’ said Mari.

‘Oh, well, that explains why they expelled you. You must try to keep yourself out of trouble.’

‘She needs to learn not to be so impulsive,’ said Mari.

‘She can’t help it, Mari; she takes after you.’

‘I am here, you know. I’m not deaf.’

Seivar usually built or worked for companies that satisfied the purpose of their creation, so they were typically involved in ecology, environmental issues, and animal welfare. In the Seivar community, gainful employment was heavily reliant on who you knew rather than just what you learned and how many qualifications you had. If you were keen and willing to work hard, the community were happy to take a chance on you. Bronwyn was Mari’s closest friend. She and her husband John bought the Acacia Academy a few years before. So when Ariessy’s headmaster made her leave the school, Mari decided she’d be happier forgetting about her studies and starting work instead. As Henry was a teacher, Bronwyn suggested she follow in his footsteps and offered her an apprenticeship at Acacia, which Ariessy was more than happy to accept. She taught reading, writing and Welsh to the younger children at the Academy. She didn’t teach sorcery yet. Seivar children didn’t

develop their gifts until they were nine or ten years old to protect them from the dangers of revealing themselves to the human world before they were old enough to understand the risks.

‘Are you enjoying working at the Acacia, Essy?’ asked Isobel.

‘Yes, I love it; the kids are amazing.’

‘How long have you been there now?’

‘Four months.’ Ariessy picked up her bag and slid it over her shoulder.

‘Oh, you left school last year then?’ A momentary smile flashed across Isobel’s face, but it was short-lived.

Ariessy reached down and hugged her. ‘Yes. I’m sorry about Gertie. I wish there were something I could do to help.’

‘Thank you, love,’ said Isobel.

‘Essy, remember your coat; it’s going to rain,’ said Mari.

‘Oh Mari, she’s not a child anymore,’ said Isobel, ‘stop fussing over her.’

Mari turned to Ariessy. ‘And eat properly at lunchtime.’

‘She’ll eat when she’s hungry,’ said Isobel.

‘She missed dinner last night,’ said Mari.

‘Why, are you sick, Essy?’ The crease in Isobel’s forehead deepened.

‘No, I was tired. You know, Mum worries too much.’

‘She fell asleep at six o’clock,’ said Mari.

‘Well then, your mother’s right.’

‘I’ll be all right.’ She headed to the door. ‘Call me if Dad wakes up; I need to know he’s okay.’

‘I will, darling,’ said Mari.

As Ariessy lifted her coat off the hook, a knot twisted inside her gut. *Could Nan be right? Is there a murderer loose in our hometown, or is she letting her grief get the better of her?* She tried to shake the picture of Gertie's foot out of her mind, but it kept creeping back in.



## CHAPTER 2

The Acacia Academy was an impressive building; it had an elegant Edwardian style exterior and was in good repair considering its age. The grand clock sitting in its central space always kept the correct time, although the clanging of the bell every hour was louder than Ariessy would have liked. In addition to bold Private Property signs, various security measures kept humans away, mainly a powerful spell surrounding the perimeter. The results were simple but effective; if humans wandered too near, they felt compelled to turn around and go back the way they came, no questions asked. Seivar couldn't use mind manipulation to compel humans the way the Veurrulfar did, and the threat of being ashefied—as

well as legislation and modern technology, made using sorcery challenging, to say the least.

Ariessy sped past the iron gates, slammed on her brakes and swerved into a parking space. She glanced up at the grand clock. Oh, hexit, I'm late—again. She snatched her bag from the passenger's seat and, using her coat as an umbrella, raced to the entrance doors.

The modern decor inside contrasted its old-world exterior as the building filled with natural light, which beamed in from tall windows and shimmered on the marble-effect tiled floor. In the foyer hung a giant red dragon painting, with the words: *Cenedl heb iaith, cenedl heb galon* curved over the top. It meant a nation without language is a nation without heart.

Ariessy hurried into her classroom and found Steve relaxing back in her chair with his feet up on her desk. He eyeballed her with his big brown eyes; he was in his thirties but had the playful attitude of a much younger man. 'Morning Essy,' he said in his broad Scottish accent.

'Hi,' she returned her sweetest grin, hoping he wouldn't mention her timekeeping—or lack of it.

'It's nine twenty-six,' he said.

'Since when did you become the talking clock?' She took off her coat and hung it on a peg beside the door.

Steve tutted. 'You do realise you're late, again.'

'I know I'm sorry.'

'Anything to get out of early morning meetings, huh? What's your excuse this time?'

‘I lost track of time.’ Her phone pinged in a text message.  
‘Who’s that?’ he asked.  
‘Nosey. It’s Bronwyn.’  
‘What does it say? Are you in trouble?’  
She scanned through the text while chewing on her thumbnail. ‘She wants to see me in her office at lunchtime.’  
‘That means you’re toast.’  
‘Oh great, thanks for the reassurance.’  
‘Essy, you’ve been late every day this week, and it’s Friday tomorrow.’  
‘She’ll understand, though, won’t she?’  
‘Just remember it’s me who’s been covering for you.’  
‘Yes, I know, I owe you one.’  
‘More than one, but don’t worry, you can pay me back in spocktails next week.’  
‘Why, what’s happening next week?’  
‘It’s Llewellyn’s birthday as it happens, not that we need an excuse to celebrate,’ he grinned. ‘We’re meeting at the Cavern at eight o’clock. I want to see you there, no excuses.’  
She took out her phone and opened her calendar. ‘All right. It’s in the diary.’  
‘Right then, I’ll leave you to the carpet caterpillars; they’re in a delightful mood, as you can see.’ He glanced around the room and broke into a wide-open smile.  
She paused to watch the children. The sound of wooden chair legs getting dragged along the floor was uncomfortable

for everyone, but with heightened senses, for Ariessy, it was harrowing. She forced a smile. ‘They’re excitable this morning.’

‘Yeah, well, over to you, I’ve only been here half an hour, and I’m exhausted already.’ He chuckled to himself as he left the room.

David and Lewis were drawing large shapes on the whiteboard with bright coloured pens. Sarah was sitting cross-legged with a pile of books she’d taken from the bookcase in the corner of the room, and Sophie was spinning around in circles with her long curls flying across her face.

‘I’m going to be the most powerful Seiva in the world,’ shouted Star from the back of the classroom. She flicked her long black hair behind her and ran up to Ariessy. ‘It’s my birthday soon.’

‘I know, you’re going to be six,’ said Ariessy.

‘Yes, and I’m going on holiday to geese,’ she wrapped her arms around Ariessy’s knees. ‘I’m going to miss you.’

‘I’ll miss you too, Star, but you still have a few weeks before the school holidays, and it’s Greece darling; geese are the birds.’

Most of the other children in the class didn’t like Star. Her abrupt and over-confident manner grated on them, but Ariessy sensed it was an act to hide her insecurities. Her family expected her to live up to their infamous qualities, all of whom held positions of high authority and responsibility within the community. Despite her young age, Star was terrified of not being good enough, so Ariessy did her best to encourage her.

David ran up and stood stock-still in front of Ariessy with a wide grin. ‘Good morning Essy,’ he said in a quiet voice.

Ariessy bent down and rested her hand on his shoulder. ‘Good morning, Mr Harris. What are we going to do today?’

‘I don’t know,’ he shuffled from foot to foot.

She circled her hand and manifested a giant blue bubble over her desk. ‘Okay, class, let’s see if you can all sit down quietly before the bubble bursts, and...GO!’

The kids raced to the centre of the room, flopped themselves down and gazed up at her with eager faces.

‘Sophie, what should we do for the next hour?’ she asked.

Lewis held his arm at the elbow and stretched it up as far as he could. ‘Can we play a game?’

‘Mm, well let me see, how about lliwiau Cymraeg?’

The children broke into a cacophony of excited squeals.

‘Okay, in case any of you have forgotten the rules. I’m going to give you the name of a colour in Welsh, and you’re going to find the matching-coloured mat, and sit down on it as fast as you can. The last person to sit on the correct mat will have to say the word for me in Welsh first and then in English.’

‘Yes, I love this game,’ shouted Lewis.

‘Ready?’ Ariessy smiled.

The children screamed out excitedly and raised themselves off the floor in readiness.

‘All right, ready—OREN!’

Ariessy chuckled as the children raced to the orange mat, scrambling over each other. She hadn’t contemplated teaching

until Bronwyn suggested it; her own experiences of being a pupil were a world away. The Gibson's envisioned a more nurturing environment where the kids could flex their creative muscles and share decisions in their learning, which Ariessy embraced wholeheartedly. That was the main reason John and Bronwyn didn't make the kids wear a uniform. They had the school emblem sewn onto T-shirts of every colour, and providing their shoes didn't have heels, they were free to wear whatever they liked. Now, teaching the little ones was a job Ariessy had come to love, and she couldn't imagine doing anything else.



Ariessy knocked on the headmistress's door; she didn't realise she was chewing her lower lip until she bit too hard and flinched.

Bronwyn opened the door with smiling eyes. 'Essy, good, you're here, take a seat,' she was a short, well-rounded lady, and her long floral skirt swept behind her as she strode back behind her desk. 'How is your dad, honey?'

'He's up and down, to be honest, and Mum is worried; she's fussing over every little thing as usual.'

‘Yes, it’s a difficult time for you all; how are you managing? You look tired.’

‘I’m okay, thank you.’

‘You’ve missed quite a few morning meetings; you must call in and let us know when you’re going to arrive late.’

‘Yes, I’m sorry, my head has been all over the place lately. I’ll do better from now on.’

‘Well, if there’s anything John or I can do, you only have to say.’

‘Thank you.’

Has anyone told you about the workshops we’ve organised?’

‘No.’

John hurried into the office behind them. He was tall and thin, with a thick, wild beard that reminded her of a mad professor. ‘Hello Essy,’ he said with a beaming smile, ‘how are you?’

‘What on Earth are you wearing, John? You smell like an aftershave advertisement,’ said Bronwyn.

‘How can I smell like an advert, dear? As far as I’m aware, we still haven’t invented smelly-vision.’

Ariessy stifled a laugh with a wide smile.

‘You know what I meant. I called Essy in to talk to her about the Wildlife Warrior project.’

‘Oh, yes, we’re excited about it.’ John didn’t look up; he was struggling to open the safe.

‘A warrior, what?’ asked Ariessy.

John clasped a hand over his lower back, ‘Oh, bloody hell, who lowered the safe while I wasn’t looking?’ His humour and animated expression made Ariessy laugh. She loved his optimistic nature; he had a heart of gold and always seemed happy to offer a helping hand—he reminded her of her dad in that way.

Bronwyn turned to help him. ‘What are you trying to stuff in there?’ she asked.

‘Paperwork, love, there’s so much of it.’

‘Leave it a moment and tell Essy about the workshops.’

‘Oh yes, well, we’ve set up what we’re calling Wildlife Warrior workshops. They’re classes for human kids on the weekends and perhaps after school if it becomes popular.’

Ariessy’s jaw dropped. ‘Did you say, humans?’

‘Yes, aged between nine and thirteen. We’ve already recruited a few local schools, and they’re thrilled with the idea, aren’t they, Bronwyn?’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Ariessy. ‘Why human kids? What are you going to teach them?’

‘Environmental studies, how to take care of our wildlife, and of course, the importance of sustainability,’ he said.

‘We need to bring the message of environmental protection straight to them,’ said Bronwyn.

‘We’ve organised visits to Melincourt, Aberdulais and Plantasia, to interest them in local wildlife and teach them more about the ecological problems we face globally. The hope is that

they'll begin to understand how much of a difference each of them can make in their daily lives,' said John.

'Oh, right,' said Ariessy.

'So, what do you think?' asked John.

'It's a brilliant idea, but do you think the Vald will allow it?'

'They've tied me in knots with paperwork, but eventually, they'll approve it, I'm sure; no need to worry, I have everything in hand.'

Ariessy wasn't so sure. The Vald were the law enforcers of a race called the Veurrulfar. Odin created them in honour of his son, Thor, and tasked them with protecting humanity from non-human races— like the Seivar. Their obligations had evolved to include the imposition of laws and enforcement of restrictions placed on the Seivar community following a war between the two races back in 1666. The Veurrulfar lived primarily on a planet called Nidavellir, but over the past few hundred years, they'd built bases on Earth, where the Vald lived, concealed among the human population worldwide.

John continued in a cheerful tone. 'Once we've satisfied all their requirements, I'm sure they'll give us the go-ahead; they're much more accommodating than I expected, to be honest with you,' he said.

'We'd like you to help John teach the workshops,' said Bronwyn. 'What do you think?'

'Me?' A shadow of alarm showed on Ariessy's face.

'Yes,' John gave her a bright smile.

‘But surely, I don’t have enough teaching experience; I’ve only been working for a few months.’

‘I’ve heard nothing but excellent reports from the rest of the staff about how well you’re doing, and the kids love you,’ said John.

‘Thank you, but I’m working with Seivar children. I don’t think I’m qualified to teach human kids.’

‘Why not?’ asked Bronwyn.

‘I don’t think I have the right skills,’ said Ariessy.

‘Nonsense, you have all the skills you need. It would help if you had more confidence in yourself,’ said Bronwyn.

‘Out of all our teachers, you, my dear, are one who is most suitable for the task. You engage remarkably well with the younger children, and because you’re still young yourself, the older kids won’t feel threatened by you. We think you’re a perfect fit,’ said John.

‘We understand, the timing isn’t good, with Henry taking a turn recently, and if you don’t want to teach all the workshops, you don’t have to,’ said Bronwyn.

‘So, what do you say?’ asked John. His eager expression crushed her. John and Bronwyn had been exceptionally kind to her, and the last thing she wanted to do was disappoint them, but she knew spending a lot of time around humans was a risk she couldn’t afford to take; what if they discovered her secret?

John lowered his head and gazed up at her. ‘We can’t do it without you.’

‘I’d love to help, but I can’t; I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘Why not Essy?’ asked Bronwyn.’

She couldn’t tell them the real reason, but that didn’t matter because she had a reason which was just as valid. ‘I need to be at home as much as possible. Dad is getting sicker; I need to be there to help Mum.’

‘I was worried about that too, so I spoke to Mari this morning; She thinks it will do you good to get out of the house more,’ said Bronwyn.

‘Did she say that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Does she know I’ll be spending time with human kids?’

‘Yes, she seemed to think it was a great idea.’

‘She did?’

‘It’s settled then. The Vald are visiting us this afternoon, so if they want to ask a few questions, be polite. It shouldn’t take too long,’ said John.

Ariessy’s fatigue disappeared in an instant. ‘Vald officers are coming here? To the Academy? Today?’

‘Don’t look so worried; they want to put names to faces, that’s all,’ said Bronwyn. ‘It’s nothing you need to be nervous about.’

John ruffled the top of Ariessy’s head. ‘You worry too much.’

Ariessy frowned. Isobel had drummed it into her since she was a little girl that she must never speak to the Vald, not under any circumstances, but she was too startled by the revelation to offer any resistance.

‘Our first trip is planned for noon on Saturday—we’re going to Melincourt Falls. The coach will arrive ten minutes before, so be at Margam community centre by quarter-to, if you can,’ said John.

‘This Saturday?’ asked Ariessy.

‘I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. We just want you to encourage the kids to have fun and answer their questions; that’s all,’ said Bronwyn.

‘Okay.’ She returned an unconvinced smile. *What am I getting myself into?*

‘I do have one more favour to ask before you go,’ said John. ‘I’m going to be a lot busier with all this going on, so I need you to take over a few manifestation classes for me.’

Ariessy tried not to show her reluctance. She paused. ‘I mean, if there’s no one else, I could maybe manage a few lessons,’ she said.

Bronwyn sat back in her chair and moved a pile of paperwork around her desk. ‘Ah, here it is—the curriculum for this term.’

Ariessy sat in silence and read down the bullet-point list. The concealing spell, healing spell, covering tracks, self-protection, and finally, the projection of thought spell, which was just a polite way to describe compulsion. A stronger Seiva could compel others to do their bidding by projecting their thoughts onto them. However, the ability didn’t work on humans, or Veurrulfar for that matter. It was impossible to hide from the Vald; sorcery didn’t affect the Veurrulfar race directly. Seivar couldn’t compel them, and to top it off, the Veurrulfar looked

human, which meant they couldn't tell the Vald and the humans apart. Unfortunately, the Vald had the upper hand because Seivar had a golden aura surrounding their bodies which—although invisible to humans—meant the Vald could identify a Seiva from a good distance, even in a crowd at night. As Ariessy grew up, Isobel made it clear that she mustn't draw attention to herself among humans for fear of attracting the attention of the Vald. She never explained why, though, and Ariessy was afraid to ask.

'Essy, are you all right?' asked John.

'Oh, yes, sorry.'

'So, what do you think? You shouldn't have any trouble teaching those spells.'

Ariessy tried to hide her growing concern. 'The projection of thought spell is a bit advanced for this age group, isn't it?' she said.

'There are some talented Seivar among them who need challenges if we're to identify their potential,' said John.

'What if it gets out of hand and they try to control each other?'

'It's important we find out who has that ability so we can guide them in the right direction, don't you agree?' said Bronwyn.

'I suppose so.' Ariessy wasn't convinced but didn't want to challenge the headmistress and appear disrespectful. 'Oh, and one last thing before you go. We've arranged a charity dinner on Saturday 18th to raise funds for our Wildlife Warrior project.'

John invited some parents to come along; it would be great if you'd join us.' Bronwyn handed Ariessy an invitation. I'm sure they'd love to meet our volunteers. I know it's late notice. I had intended to give this to you during our morning meeting on Monday, but as you've been absent all week, I haven't had the chance. You'll come, won't you?'

Ariessy stared at the invitation.

'Essy?' said John.

'Oh—yes.' She nodded and got up from her seat. She needed some fresh air fast; her mind was swarming with concerns.

'We're all praying for your dad, love,' said Bronwyn.

'Thank you; I'll tell him.' As she left the room, she raised her eyes to the ceiling and whispered. 'Freyja, please help me.'



That afternoon, Nathan Jackson and Rick Kramer marched through the main entrance to Acacia Academy. They didn't look approachable; both were unshaven and wore black combat trousers and boots. Jackson stood a little shorter than Kramer, who had a scowl on his face.

John greeted them with a nervous smile. 'I'm John Gibson. We spoke on the phone.' He held out his hand.

‘Vald Jackson,’ he said, shaking John’s hand. ‘This is Vald Kramer.’

Kramer nodded and looked around.

‘It’s nice to meet you; please come this way.’ John led the two men through the entrance hall and into a wide corridor leading to the offices and staff rooms.

Jackson took an interest in the artwork posted up on the walls and stopped to take a closer look. ‘Are these drawings of Inger?’ he asked.

John’s tone was apologetic. ‘Yes, as I’m sure you know, the sisters are a significant part of our history.’

Born in the Middle Ages, sisters Inger and Sig were nomadic tribeswomen from Svealand in Sweden who had been orphaned as children. The girls were inseparable until Sig came of age and caught the eye of the King. As she was beguiling and intelligent, the King asked her to work in the palace. Sig begged Inger to go with her, but Inger refused to live with the human King, explaining it was too dangerous for sorcerers and humans to live together. After a lengthy discussion, Inger finally accepted Sig’s decision to go alone but made her promise she would never use sorcery within the royal grounds. Sig agreed, and after a sorrowful goodbye, she left Inger to settle in a nearby wood, alone and moved into the palace.

During her time with the King, Sig repeatedly acted against Inger’s wishes and used her sorcery within the palace walls. One day, a servant woman witnessed Sig manifesting healing light over an injured piglet, and Sig’s body erupted into flames.

Terrified, the servant woman ran to tell the King's men what happened, but when she arrived, she couldn't recall why she was so scared and was left confused. It was some time before the King's men found the remains of Sig's body, and a part of her arm was left untouched by the flames. Horrified and scared, the King's men feared Sig's death was the work of Surtr, the fire giant. Looking for someone to blame, they turned to Sig's hermit sister, Inger. Taken by surprise and without a tribe to protect her, Inger couldn't defend herself from the King's army. They dragged her to the palace to answer for her crimes, and when she failed to satisfy their accusations, they sentenced her to the same fate as her sister. To this day, Inger is believed to be the first and only Seiva to have been burned at the stake. The community have long since debated why she didn't use sorcery to take control of her death. Being ashefied by Freyja's curse is quick and painless, which is undoubtedly preferable to being burned alive.

The children had drawn colourful illustrations of the sisters' life stories. One of the drawings was a wooden stake outside the palace with a woman tied to it wide-eyed, as orange flames snaked up her body.

'Inger is worshipped by the Móttaka. Do you teach the children about them, too?' Kramer's tone brimmed with disapproval.

'I believe this lesson was for younger children to understand the importance of using sorcery with caution,' said John.

‘If you’re going to use Inger to make a point to the kids, then educate them while they’re young to ensure they understand the danger of organisations like the Móttaka,’ said Kramer.

‘The Móttaka are hell-bent on culling humanity, and their sacrifices to Inger have played a pivotal role in that,’ said Jackson.

‘To immortalise her as a hero in this way is irresponsible and dangerous,’ said Kramer.

‘But the Móttaka are now thankfully confined to the history books. The community is left having to live with the terrible things our ancestors did; we don’t want to push that guilt on our children at such a young age,’ said John.

‘On the contrary, John, without education, history is doomed to be repeated,’ said Jackson.

‘I suggest Inger is taken off the curriculum until the children are old enough to learn of the Móttaka,’ said Kramer.

‘I understand; I’ll make amendments immediately,’ said John.

The Móttaka had been a chilling rebel organisation whose primary interest was culling the human population. What humanity believed were caused by rats, gerbils, and birds were, in fact, the result of dark sorcery in the guise of plagues brought to Earth from other worlds using ancient portals. Previously, other races had used stone monuments to open supernatural doors and trade goods and services, but that was before the Móttaka made plans to enslave humanity. In 1666 the plague became so deadly that it forced the Veurrulfar to create a fire in London to purify Inger’s negative energies and prevent any

further spread. To protect them, the Veurrulfar established the Vald in its present form and set up permanent Earth bases to oversee the Seiva community's plans and enforce their own laws. To this day, the Vald still carry tremendous guilt over the two deaths in the great fire. However, more people have died after falling off the monument memorial than ever perished in the fire itself.

After the Móttaka's crimes against humanity, Odin demanded that the Veurrulfar dismantle all the stone portals, leaving only those which accessed Nidavellir directly. The Vald acted on Odin's wishes immediately, and their portals are now heavily guarded and protected.



Ariessy was in the middle of a writing lesson with her six-year-olds when John invited Jackson and Kramer into her classroom. She was lying on the floor in front of a shallow sandpit, surrounded by children with expectant expressions.

‘I want you to write the first letter of your name in the sand, remember it has to be a capital,’ she said. ‘I’ll show you.’ She drew the letter A with her finger and smiled. ‘Going clockwise,

you'll all have a turn, so don't push in front of each other,' she swept the letter away and gestured to Thomas to go first.

'Mine's T', he said, beaming a smile which was missing two front teeth.

Ariessy laughed. 'Yes, well done, now show me how you write it.'

Thomas scribbled a wobbly T in the sand with a shaky finger. The children giggled.

'It looks like a snake,' said Star.

'No, it doesn't,' Thomas scowled at her.

John cleared his throat a couple of times before Ariessy noticed them standing there. She jumped to her feet with a nervous smile. 'I'm sorry, we were just—' she paused, caught in Kramer's gaze.

'As you see, Ariessy teaches our younger children,' said John.

Kramer strode up to her and folded his arms. 'You seem a little young to be teaching. Are you confident enough to manage a group of human teenagers?' he asked.

Ariessy's eyes darted to John.

He nodded for her to answer.

'Um, yes, I love kids,' she replied.

'I see,' said Kramer.

Star called out from the back of the room, 'I need help.'

'Please continue your work, don't let us disturb you,' said Jackson.

‘Yes, thank you,’ she rushed back to the children. ‘Oh no, Ella, don’t eat it, sweetheart,’ she said as she scooped a clump of sand out of the little girl’s hand.

‘I think she must be hungry,’ said Daniel.

Jackson smiled.

Kramer raised his brow and turned to John. ‘What does she teach?’

‘English and Welsh, as well as manifestation,’ said John.

They watched her fetch a glass of water for Ella.

‘What will she be teaching your young warriors?’ asked Jackson.

‘Wildlife conservation, she has a particular interest in birds.’

‘Birds?’ said Kramer.

‘Yes, she’s a talented healer; they love her,’ said John.

‘Who, the birds, or the children?’ asked Jackson.

‘Well, both, actually,’ John chuckled.

‘Thank you, John, we’ve seen enough,’ said Kramer.

‘Yes, of course.’ He turned around and led them to the door.

Ariessy heard the door close behind them and sighed. ‘I love kids? Well done, Essy—you idiot,’ she muttered.

‘Essy, can I have water, too?’ asked David rubbing his eyes.

‘Yes, let’s all have a break and a drink, shall we?’

Kramer held back and observed Ariessy through the glass in the classroom door.

John stopped and waited, ‘Vald Kramer, is everything all right?’ he asked.

Kramer drew his eyebrows together. ‘Fine,’ he said and re-joined him.

After exchanging their goodbyes, Jackson and Kramer strolled back down the cobbled stone path to their car.

‘So, what do you think?’ asked Jackson.

‘There’s something about her,’ said Kramer.

‘The girl, Ariessy?’

‘Yeah—I can’t put my finger on it.’

‘I agree; let’s slip in an insurance policy.’

Kramer climbed into the passenger seat and put on his sunglasses. ‘Got anyone in mind?’

‘Leave it with me,’ said Jackson.